

MIŁOSZ IN COPENHAGEN

1.

I was in Warsaw on the day it was announced that Thomas Tranströmer was awarded the Nobel Prize. We sat in the gentle October sunshine outside the house of literature at Krakowskie Przedmieście, a group of poets from several countries. It was a little past one o'clock Thursday afternoon, and Tranströmer's name flew joyfully from table to table. A reporter later asked the Polish Nobel recipient Wisława Szymborska, "What were your thoughts when you heard Tranströmer won the Nobel prize?." "I was so happy," she said, "that I jumped up and down on one leg."

Poland and Denmark are neighbors, but for political reasons people in Warsaw and Copenhagen have for long periods lived on different planets. Today a plane ticket to Warsaw does not cost much more than a train ticket to Jutland. Something is happening. But still it is a little scattered and accidental what there is of Polish literature translated into Danish, and the Danish discourse on Poland is even now mixed with ignorance and romanticism. Periodically, it has tended towards a mild form of orientalism.

2.

The centenary of Miłosz's birth was celebrated in Copenhagen, too. There was a symposium at the Royal Library. Knowledgeable people from Poland and Lithuania surveyed important aspects of his work. But, symptomatically, not many Danish writers were present at the event.

I can take it as given that if I asked a colleague what Czesław Miłosz has meant to Danish poetry, a momentary awkwardness would arise. Not because Danish poets are not familiar with Miłosz; it is just that on an everyday basis he does not take up much space in Danish literary consciousness. People know of him and respect him, he was awarded the Nobel Prize, is a major poet, no doubt, and that is that. Only a few would name Miłosz as a model or an inspiration.

Part of the explanation is undoubtedly the paradox that a political agenda in Denmark stood in the way for Miłosz. He was a Polish defector, living in the US, while the Left in Denmark still attached a small hope to the Soviet Union and Communist Eastern Europe. Only after the fall of the Wall and the events of 1989 did that illusion definitively whither away. And only then was Miłosz – in the Danish context – raised from the ambiguous shadow world of dissidents.

“Unknown author receives this year’s Nobel prize,” *Politiken* stated on October 10, 1980. True enough, Czesław Miłosz was completely unknown in Denmark at the time. There was a small chapbook, *Den store fristelse* (The Great Temptation), published by Selskabet for Frihed og Kultur (The Society for Freedom and Culture). Nothing else had been translated. A few days later the poet Jess Ørnsbo in the same newspaper called the awarding of the Nobel Prize to Miłosz “a mistake” and Miłosz himself “one of literature’s foot soldiers,” whose poetry is “of limited interest.”

In spite of this somewhat condescending tone it was Ørnsbo who a year later translated a selection of Miłosz’s poems into Danish. The translation, probably commissioned, is soundly crafted, but without passion. The same year *The Issa Valley* appeared, followed by *Native Realm*.

It was only fifteen years later, when Janina Katz together with Uffe Harder took a more caring approach to Miłosz, that we received a solid selection of the poems in Danish, *Kort over tiden* (A Map of Time). Janina Katz was born in Kraków and raised in Poland. Today she is a Copenhagen native. Translating Miłosz was part of her transformation from Pole to Dane. She needed to bring the best of Poland along with her into the Danish: poets such as Zbigniew Herbert and Czesław Miłosz, beautifully translated by a poet who herself writes poetry in both languages. Katz was assisted by the splendid Danish poet Uffe Harder.

When you investigate the presence of Miłosz in Denmark via the electronic catalogue bibliotek.dk, it turns out that there are 67 copies of his poetry at Danish libraries. No more, no less – that is it. As I am writing this short essay, none of these books are lent out. Additionally, there are some

copies in Polish and in English. So it seems that Miłosz has never really been absorbed and integrated as a vital part of Danish poetry.

Contemplating why, it is reasonable to take off from Ørnbo's spontaneous line that Miłosz's poetry is "of limited interest." Many Danish poets would probably agree with him. Mainstream Danish poetry has a different focus and completely different ideals when it comes to language and style. Miłosz writes a compact, dense language with layer upon layer of connotations and cultural resonance. His poetry refers to conditions and problems that have quite effectively been dislodged from contemporary Danish consciousness.

Another issue is his religiosity. In Scandinavia everyone – ministers and believers included – is in principle a sort of atheist and hence not susceptible to the religious aspects of Miłosz's poetry. Good and evil, guilt and responsibility, and all of that, are not common themes in Danish poetry. To mention only one example: Klaus Rifbjerg, untroubled, stated ironically in *Voliere* that "Guilt is just something you have, man." Existential brooding is not in vogue at the moment.

Nonetheless, *Kanon*, a Danish textbook for high schools published by Gyldendal, features two poems by Czesław Miłosz in Janina Katz's splendid translation: "A Confession" and "And Yet the Books."

3.

In Warsaw I enter a bookstore. Miłosz is well represented on its shelves: his autobiographical books, but first and foremost his poetry. I buy a cup of coffee and spend an hour or so browsing the books and leafing through Polish journals. Then I buy *Proud to Be a Mammal*. With Miłosz in my bag I am wandering through Warsaw – the city which reproduces itself and is constantly reborn.

I am sitting on a chair in China as I am writing these words. If you ask Chinese poets, it turns out that many of them are familiar with Miłosz. For obvious reasons, he is useful. His knowledge obtained as a youth caught between Nazism and Stalinism looks recognizable to the Chinese, now when China is in the middle of a great re-alignment from Maoism to a roaring market economy. They know whereof he speaks. How do intellectuals and culturally aware people conduct themselves under a totalitarian system? Miłosz has reflected deeply and thoroughly on this subject, with an insider's understanding of all the impossible paradoxes.

When Czesław Miłosz’s centenary was observed at the Royal Library, the moderator rounded off by saying, “I feel as though I were in a ‘time pocket.’ What we are discussing here seems far from anything preoccupying people in 2011.” In my opinion, nothing could be more wrong. This statement makes sense only within a narrow Danish context, and barely there. Across time and geography Miłosz is a key participant in contemporary reflections on important themes in philosophy, religion and politics. A strong ethos flows through his work – combined with a robust sense of self-irony – that makes his poetry durable.

On the occasion of the Miłosz symposium in Copenhagen, I translated one of his poems, “At a Certain Age.” The daily *Politiken* published it on the day the event took place.

I en vis alder

Vi ønsker at skrifte vore synder, men der er ingen modtager.
 De hvide skyer nægter at godtage dem, og vinden
 har alt for travlt med at vende bølge efter bølge.
 Vi har ingen succes med at interessere dyrene.
 Hunde afventer utålmodigt en ordre,
 og katten, umoralsk som altid, falder i søvn.
 En nærtstående person, tilsyneladende meget tæt på,
 gider ikke høre tale om ting fra en fjern fortid.
 Samtaler med venner over vodka eller kaffe
 bør ikke forlænges ud over de første tegn på kedsomhed.
 Det ville være ydmygende at betale timetakst
 til en mand med eksamensbevis, bare for at lytte.
 Kirker. Måske kirker. Men for at bekende hvad dér?
 At vi plejede at se os selv som pæne og anstændige,
 men så senere i stedet finder en grim tudse
 med halv-åbne tykke øjenlåg
 og tydeligt indser: „Det er mig.”

Postscript: The Danish translation of Miłosz’s *Road-side Dog – En hund ved vejen* – was published by Rod & Co. in Copenhagen in 2012. The collection has been translated and introduced by Judyta Preis and Jørgen Herman Mondrad.

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